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ABSTRACT

The 1984 campaign between Republican Jesse Helms and Democrat Jim Hunt of North Carolina was one of the most expensive campaigns in history. The Helms campaign spent an estimated $15.6 million and Hunt is believed to have raised $9.8 million. Both sides relied heavily on television advertising. A study was conducted to measure the link between television advertising and its influence on voter decision. Data for this study were gathered by content analyses of television commercials and television news and through a statewide survey of 796 adult respondents. More than seven of ten voters reported that their decisions were primarily influenced by an overall image of the candidate rather than by specific issues. The findings indicate that, in the North Carolina 1984 senatorial campaign that incumbant Jesse Helms did win, commercials were more effective than television news in influencing or reinforcing issue and image agendas for voters. The public agenda more accurately reflected the salience of issues "learned" from advertising campaigns than they did the salience-set of television news. Further research needs to be conducted in this area to replicate these findings and demonstrate the agenda-setting function of advertising outside the political context. (DF)

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POLITICAL SPOTS: SETTING THE AGENDA FOR VOTER DECISIONS

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Paper submitted to the Advertising Division of the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication. The author is a doctoral student in Mass Communication Research and would like to acknowledge the advice and support given by Dr. Donald L. Shaw in the design and implementation of this study.

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The 1984 campaign between Republican Jesse Helms and Democrat Jim Hunt of North Carolina will be remembered as one of the most expensive and acrimonious senatorial races in history. By election day, the candidates -- Helms, an incumbent two-term senator, and Hunt, the governor of North Carolina for eight years -- had spent more than $25 million, a large proportion of which was budgeted for television advertising. By contrast, the Ford and Carter campaigns in 1976 together spent a total of $14 million on television advertising (Diamond and Bates, 1984 p. 257).

The first Helms' political spot aired on April 1, 1983, almost a year before the first Hunt commercial was aired in February 1984. Helms also outspent Hunt by almost two-to-one in his bid to woo voters. The Helms campaign spent an estimated $15.6 million and Hunt is believed to have raised an equally impressive but smaller amount of $9.8 million. Both sides acknowledged that their campaigns would be waged in the living rooms of North Carolina and that television would be their chosen weapons. The political spot was particularly important to the Helms strategists as they claimed it was the only way to bypass the "liberal bias" of the state's media, particularly the larger newspapers, and get their message to the voters (Luebke, 1984).

It is estimated that during the last five weeks of the campaign alone, North Carolinians were bombarded by more than 7,800 political spots. Both sides used sophisticated tracking polls to measure immediate viewer response and tailored their advertising campaigns accordingly (Snider, 1985 p. 209). Not only was the frequency of these spots high, but the commercials themselves often tended to be so

negative that it led one obviously piqued survey respondent, when asked if had seen any Helms or Hunt commercials on television, to remark: "Ain't nobody but the dawg ain't seen 'em."

In the end, after a 20-month advertising campaign, Helms neutralized the 20 percent lead Hunt had in opinion polls taken a year earlier, and won the election by a narrow margin (52 to 48 percent). With more than nine out of 10 respondents in a state-wide poll reporting that they had seen the Helms and Hunt "polispots," both campaigns succeeded in getting high penetration for their television spots. The question is whether the commercials influenced the voters decision to "buy" the products?

AGENDA-SETTING: TRANSFER OF SALIENCE

Attempts to measure the effectiveness of advertising on consumer buying behavior, whether consumer products or, as in this case, political candidates, have taken several approaches. One approach is to elicit direct consumer response through a survey, focus group or other instrument. For example, more than half (52%) of those responding to an October 1984 national survey agreed that political advertising had more impact on how Americans vote than it did even four years earlier, but most voters polled said that neither Reagan's nor Mondale's commercials had any influence, favorable or otherwise, on their voting decision (Hume, 1984). There are obvious shortcomings with this self reporting method.

The agenda-setting concept presents an alternative. It can be used more effectively to measure links between advertising and its influence on consumer choice. McCombs and Shaw (1972) first applied an

empirical test to a function of the media that previously had been recognized by scholars (Lippmann, 1922; Cohen, 1963) but which they labeled "agenda-setting." Agenda-setting is a relational concept that specifies a positive association between media salience of issues and the salience attached to those topics in the public mind. The study demonstrated the spotlighting power of the media to tell people what to think about, even if the media did not tell the audience what to think of those issues.

The terms agenda-primers and agenda-adopters are used here to refer to the main actors in the agenda-setting process. Agenda-primers are those media or agents (newspapers, television, news, advertising) whose agenda of issue salience is hypothetically transfered to agenda-adopters (individuals, community, public, and the media themselves in certain situations) via the function of agenda-setting.

The agenda-setting effect of media has been repeatedly demonstrated by several researchers since the 1972 study by McCombs and Shaw of voters in Charlotte, N.C. [1]. Most of these studies have been limited to an examination of the agenda-setting function for the tranfer of issue saliences from media to voters under varying conditions.

There is some evidence that different media (newspapers vs. television) often have different issue agendas for news and these may be transferred differentially (Weaver, et al., 1976). This has been referred to as the spotlighting role of television, as opposed to the agenda-setting role of newspapers (Weaver, et al., 1981). McCombs (1977) reported that newspapers were early primers in a political campaign, while television was more influential as the election date

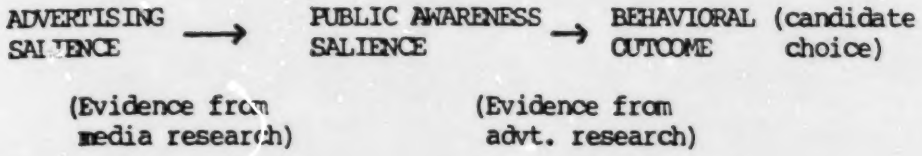
neared. Few studies have, however, looked at whether paid political messages can similarly transfer issue saliences to voters (Atkin and Heald, 1976; Patterson and McClure, 1976; Bowers, 1977).

AGENDA-SETTING IN ADVERTISING

The relevance of agenda-setting to advertising strategy, Sutherland and Galloway (1981) point out, is that the major goal of advertising is to focus consumers' attention on what values, products, brands, or attributes to think about rather than to try to persuade consumers what to think of these. They add that evidence from agenda-setting research posits a relationship between prominence in the media and salience in the public mind. On the other hand, top-of-mind recall and first-brand awareness studies from advertising and marketing research have shown that salience in the public mind is associated with behavioral outcomes like buying (See Figure 1). Thus, in the context of political advertising, any influence that paid political messages may have on agenda-setting effects should lead to a favorable impact on voters' decisions on candidate choice. This impact may be in the form of learning, or adoption of salience or reinforcement of candidate preference.

FIGURE 1:

Agenda-setting and Advertising Influence



Source: Adapted from Sutherland and Galloway, 1981

Atkin, Bowen, Nayman, and Sheinkopf (1973) report that voters felt they had learned substantive information about candidates from political advertising on television. Bowers (1973), in a content analysis of newspaper advertising, found high correlations (Spearman's rho=.97) between respondents' rankings of issues in public opinion polls and newspaper advertisements. Shaw and Bowers (1973) found similar associations between issue salience in political commercials on television and salience of campaign issues in the public agenda. O'Keefe, Nash and Liu (1981), in a study of public service advertising campaigns, reported monotonic relationships between exposure and perceived usefulness of advertising, and attention to advertisements and the degree of utility ascribed to them.

Yet, the concept of the power of the media to persuade or to influence attitude change has been challenged for some time now. Similarly, advertising research has seriously questioned the ability of paid messages to directly influence attitude change. Instead, the agenda-setting function, which has been demonstrated for news, is being increasingly studied in the context of advertising.

In the arena of political campaigns, studies have shown that television advertising contributes to voters' knowledge of candidates as measured by recall and correct identification of advertising messages (McClure and Patterson, 1974). An experimental design which matched correct identification of candidate issues after exposure to political advertising showed similar results (Rothschild and Ray, 1974).

Most of these efforts, however, have not established a link beyond

transfer of issue salience from agenda-primers to agenda-adopters; to actual voting, for instance. Also, previous studies have not much addressed the question of candidate images, as aside from issues, in this transfer of saliences. This study was designed to address these questions.

METHOD

Commercials: Data for this study were gathered by content analyses of television commercials and television news, and through a statewide telephone survey of adult respondents. Commercials paid for by the Helms and Hunt campaigns were taped off the air from two television stations in North Carolina — WRAL, an affiliate of ABC in Raleigh, and WTVD, an affiliate of CBS in Durham -- for a period of five weeks prior to and inclusive of election eve. Only commercials that appeared in the 6 p.m. to 10 p.m. time slot were used for the study. The advertising agenda was measured by 15 issues which were identified as integral to the campaign from an examination of news media and advertising in North Carolina for several months prior to the time frame examined [2]. The commercials also were coded for "images," positive or negative for each of the candidates. For example, references to the character of a candidate, "Helms is a patriotic American" or "Hunt flip-flops on his stand on issues," would have been coded as "Helms positive" and "Hunt negative", respectively. Each commercial was multiple coded for up to three issues and images [3].

The Television News: The same television stations that were used for commercials were also used for the content analysis of news stories. A

similar time frame, five weeks prior to the election, was used. The news menus of the main evening news program, the 6 O'clock news on weekdays and Sundays and the 11 o'clock show on Saturdays, were used for measuring the television news agenda. The coding scheme of issues and images was the same as that used for television commercials. Again, for each story, which was the unit of analysis, up to three issues or images were multiple coded.

The Public Agenda: The public agenda was determined by questions included in a statewide telephone survey conducted by the Center for Research in Journalism and Mass Communication at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. The sample of 796 adults was selected by a random-digit-dialing method and was verified for demographic representativeness by comparing it to census data. The poll was conducted over five consecutive nights, a week before election day (October 28 through November 1, 1984). A three-call-back procedure was used. The sample conformed to census data on gender, race and income characteristics.

Questions measured respondents' exposure to Helms and Hunt commercials. Since campaign commercials continued to be shown on television during the period of the survey a simple recall question was not used as a measure of salience. Instead, respondents who had been exposed to the political spots were asked, "What was the most important message you received from these commercials for Hunt/Helms on television."

Respondents also were asked if they planned to vote in the senatorial election, and if they did, whom they would vote for and why

("What is the most important reason for voting for Hunt/Helms"). The issues-and-images coding scheme used for measuring television news and commercials was also used for coding survey responses. Each question directly related to this study was separated by several unrelated questions to guard against set or associated response patterns. For example, the question, "What was the most important message you received from Helms commercials on TV," was separated from a similar question for Hunt commercials by several questions dealing with drinking and driving.

FINDINGS

Senator Helms outspent Governor Hunt by almost two-to-one in overall spending and this ratio apparently was sustained for advertising time bought on the state's television stations. A representative trend for advertising time bought over the final weeks of the campaign on one station serving central North Carolina is illustrative and is shown in Figure 2. Helms began his television advertising campaign 10 months before the Hunt campaign. However, voter exposure to advertising by both campaigns was high; more than nine of 10 respondents said they had seen Hunt and Helms commercials and about six in ten respondents reported having seen "many" (See Table 1).

An examination of aggregate agendas reveals that candidate images played a major part in decisions made by the electorate. More than seven of 10 voters reported that their decisions were primarily influenced by an overall image of the candidate rather than by specific

issues (See Table 2). Previous agenda-setting studies have not emphasized candidate images in measuring the transfer of saliences.

While the commercials leaned heavily on a theme of negative images, it was surprising to find that television news was also liberally peppered with negative images. Often these were reports of a candidate, or his campaign staff, accusing the other of impropriety or vice versa. There were twice the number of negative image references to Helms as there were to Hunt on the evening news.

The negative advertising campaigns run by both camps themselves became an issue in the elections. [4] Voters seemed to respond by underplaying the salience of negative messages about the other candidate in an advertisement and instead looked for reinforcement of positive images of the sponsor himself. Voters seemed to respond more favorably to "for" rather than "against" messages in the commercials.

Of the issues reported by television news, greatest emphasis was placed on stories dealing with "religion and morality." These included stories about abortion and prayer in schools. Other issues frequently reported on television news were social security and medicare, minorities and women, foreign policy, and education. By contrast, the aggregate advertising agenda placed a major emphasis on taxes, social security and medicare, employment, and education. Among the voters who reported that specific issues would influence their decisions on candidate choice, religion and morality, agriculture, and eduaction seemed to be the dominant issues.

No significant association was found between the aggregate advertising agenda and the television news agenda using a Spearman's

rank order correlation measure (See Table 2.1).

Effectiveness of advertising in getting its message across was demonstrated by a strong association (.72) between the advertising agenda (as determined by content analysis) and voters' salience of advertising messages (measured by a statewide poll). At the aggregate level, both television news (.51) and advertising (.59) demonstrated an agenda-setting influence on the voter agenda. However, there was a much stronger effect for what voters reported learning from advertising (.87). Obviously, voters selectively learned from the commercials.

HUNT vs HELMS COMMERCIALS

The analysis was taken a step further and the aggregate advertising agenda was dissected and examined at the level of the individual candidate agenda (See Table 3). The initial lack of association at the aggregate level between the television news agenda and the combined advertising agenda, as measured by content analysis of news and commercials, was sustained at the individual level too for both Hunt and Helms commercials. However, the voting agenda (ie. "the most important reason for voting Helms/Hunt") showed no association with the television news agenda at this level although there was an association at the aggregate level (See Table 3.1).

There was also no match between the voting agenda of those who had "decided" to vote for Hunt and the voting agenda of those who had "decided" to vote for Helms. Thus, when the two individual voting agendas were combined into one aggregate agenda, there appeared to be an association with the TV news agenda. But, when the aggregate agenda was dissected into individual candidate agendas this association

dissapeared. This might explain the apparent differences between associations found at the aggregate level and those observed at this level of analysis.

As expected, there was a match between the agendas of Hunt voters and Hunt commercials, and similarly between Helms voters and Helms advertising. No relationship was found on crossovers (ie. Hunt voters and Helms advertising). The Helms-to-Helms association of agendas produced the stronger rank order correlation (.67), while the Hunt voter-to-advertising agendas showed a weaker relationship (.43).

However, there was a confounding association observed between voter agenda and what voters learned from advertising. There was no relationship between the voting agenda of Hunt voters and their perceived salience of Hunt advertising. The original relationship was sustained when matched for the Helms voter to advertising-recall association (.68). Curiously, Helms voters also showed an association between their voting agenda and their recall of Hunt advertising, though it was weaker than that found for the Helms-to-Helms link (.53). Apparently, Hunt emphasized issues important to Helms voters.

DISCUSSION

The impact of television, both news and advertising, in the Senatorial election in North Carolina may be summarized as follows:

1. The salience attached to issues and candidate images by television news in North Carolina was not transfered to voters;
2. The salience patterns of images and issues from the Hunt and Helms advertising campaigns was reflected by Hunt and Helms voters

respectively in their candidate choice patterns;

3. The Helms advertising campaign was more successful than the Hunt campaign in transferring an agenda for voter decision;

4. Negative advertising was downplayed by voters.

Some general conclusions about the agenda-setting influence of political advertising on voter decisions also emerge. This study demonstrates new evidence that the agenda-setting function, previously described for news, also exists for paid political messages. There is also some confirmation for the agenda-setting function of television news.

The findings indicate that in the North Carolina 1984 senatorial campaign, which was characterized by an unparalleled $25 million television advertising campaign, commercials were more effective than television news in influencing or reinforcing issue and image agendas for voters. The public agenda more accurately reflected the salience of issues "learned" from advertising campaigns than they did the salience-set of television news.

It must be emphasized that this study does not purport to suggest any direct evidence of voter decisions being made as a result of advertising. But, support can be found for the hypothesis that voters' candidate choice decisions are reinforced or influenced by messages received from political spots. Also, a cross-sectional design, like that used in this study, does not permit inferences about direction and results must be viewed strictly as associational.

Some evidence has been found for the claim that the salience attached to issues and candidate images in political spots can be

transferred to voters. The voters, in turn, use these adopted set of saliences in reinforcing their candidate choices. Further research needs to be conducted in this area to replicate these findings and to demonstrate the agenda-setting function of advertising outside the political context. The agenda-setting approach, as demonstrated by this study, can help probe the link between cognitions (ie. the cognitive component of attitudes) and behavior.

END-NOTES

1. An extensive bibliography of agenda-setting studies during the last decade can be found in "Agenda-Setting Research: A Bibliographic Essay," by M.E. McCombs, Syracuse University, 1976; and in "Media Agenda-Setting and Public Opinion: A Review of Studies on the Effects of Mass Media," by David Weaver, The Bulletin of the Institute for Communications Research, Keio University (Japan), 1984.

2. The 15 issues coded were: agriculture, civil order and crime, defense and national security, general references to the economy, education, employment, environment, foreign policy, references to the deficit and budget, industry and labor, minorities and women's issues, religion and morality which included abortion and the issue of prayer in schools, social programs, social security and medicare, and taxes. Four images were also coded: positive or negative references to both Helms and Hunt.

3. The coding was done by the author and Dr. Donald Shaw. Television commercials, television news stories and voter responses from a survey were coded by both coders working in tandem. There were few conflicts in assigning coding categories and in those cases were such a disagreement did occur, they were resolved by agreement. A reliability test was, therefore, deemed inappropriate.

4. During the last of four debates between Helms and Hunt a written question from the media asked Governor Hunt whether he thought there was a backlash "from the barrage of negative advertising you and your opponent have been running?" Hunt replied: "This campaign started way back on April 1, 1983, when Senator Helms started running advertising, all of it critical...In (an earlier) debate I challenged him...let's cut out the negative advertising....He said no." Helms replied: "You know what a negative ad is, don't you? It's the other fellow's ad....I have repeatedly suggested to (Hunt) to inform me of any advertisement that we run that is not factual. He has not done that." (Snider, 1985 pg. 184)

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TABLE 1:

VOTER EXPOSURE TO ADVERTISING CAMPAIGNS

	Hunt Advt.	Helms Advt.
SEEN ANY	95.8%	93.7% *
Few	19.5	20.5
Some	16.4	20.0
Many	62.9	58.7

* All 796 respondents in a state-wide survey in North Carolina were asked whether they had seen any Hunt/Helms commercials, irrespective of whether they intended to vote in the election or not. Only those who said they had seen Hunt/Helms commercails were asked how many they had seen.

TABLE 2: AGGREGATE AGENDAS: NEWS, ADVERTISING, VOTERS

AGENDA	TV News (a)	TV Advt. (b)	Message voters recd. from Advt. (c)	Reason to Vote Hunt/ Helms (d)
ISSUES:				
Agriculture	3.9%	4.4%	7.2%	3.4%
Civil order, crime	3.9	-	0.3	0.4
Defense, national security	-	0.3	0.2	0.6
Economy in general	2.6	5.3	0.8	1.6
Education	5.2	8.3	5.2	2.6
Employment	-	8.9	0.2	0.6
Environment	-	-	-	0.2
Foreign Policy	5.2	-	0.2	0.8
Budget, deficits etc.	1.3	3.3	0.8	1.0
Industry, labor	2.6	2.4	0.8	0.6
Minorities, ERA	5.2	-	-	1.2
Religion, morality	11.7	5.0	6.1	4.6
Social programs	-	-	1.6	2.4
Soc. security, medicare	9.1	9.5	14.2	2.6
Taxes	-	14.2	10.1	2.0
IMAGES:				
Helms positive	3.9	7.1	11.9	33.1
Helms negative	27.3	13.3	13.4	11.9
Hunt positive	2.6	6.2	15.3	23.6
Hunt negative	13.0	11.8	11.9	6.7
	100%	100%	100%	100%
N=	(77)	(338)	(636)	(496)

TABLE 2.1: COMPARING AGGREGATE AGENDAS FOR COMPATABILITY

AGENDA	TV News	TV Advt.	Message Voters recd. from Advt.	Reason to Vote Hunt/ Helms
TV News	1.0			
TV Advertising	.23	1.0		
Msg. recd. from Advt.	.37	.72*	1.0	
Reason to Vote	.51*	.59*	.87*	1.0

* Spearman's rho; p = .05

(a). Television news agenda from content analysis of last five weeks of campaign.

(b). Aggregate advertising agenda from content analysis of all prime-time political spots (Hunt and Helms) during final five weeks.

(c). Public salience of advertising messages from statewide poll. Asked of all respondents who had seen Hunt/Helms advertising: "What was the most important message you received from these advertisements for Hunt/Helms on television?"

(d). Public agenda from statewide poll. Asked only of those who said they would vote in the election and who had made a candidate choice: "What is the most important reason for voting for Hunt/Helms?"

TABLE 3: HUNT vs. HELMS: ADVERTISING, VOTER AGENDAS

AGENDA	TV advertising Hunt	TV advertising Helms(a)	Message voters recd. from advt. Hunt	Message voters recd. from advt. Helms(b)	Reason for voting Hunt	Reason for voting Helms(c)
ISSUES:						
Agriculture	-	8.4%	4.5%	9.8%	0.5%	5.9%
Civil order, crime	-	-	0.6	-	0.5	0.4
Defense, nat. sec.	0.6	-	0.3	-	0.5	0.8
Economy in general	3.8	6.7	0.3	1.2	0.5	2.0
Education	17.7	-	9.4	1.2	2.8	1.2
Employment	15.8	2.8	0.3	-	1.4	-
Environment	-	-	-	-	0.5	-
Foreign Policy	-	-	-	0.3	0.9	0.4
Budget, deficits etc.	-	6.1	1.3	0.3	0.5	1.2
Industry, labor	-	4.5	1.6	-	2.4	0.4
Minorities, ERA	-	-	-	-	0.9	0.4
Religion, morality	7.0	3.4	3.3	8.8	0.9	7.8
Social programs	-	-	1.6	1.5	3.8	1.2
Soc. security, medicare	8.2	10.6	11.4	16.8	1.9	2.3
Taxes	3.2	24.0	10.4	9.8	0.9	3.1
IMAGES:						
Helms positive	-	13.4	0.6	22.6	1.4	59.8
Helms negative	27.8	0.6	6.2	20.1	27.5	-
Hunt positive	13.3	-	29.9	1.5	52.1	1.7
Hunt negative	2.5	20.1	18.2	6.1	-	11.7
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
N=	(158)	(179)	(308)	(328)	(211)	(256)

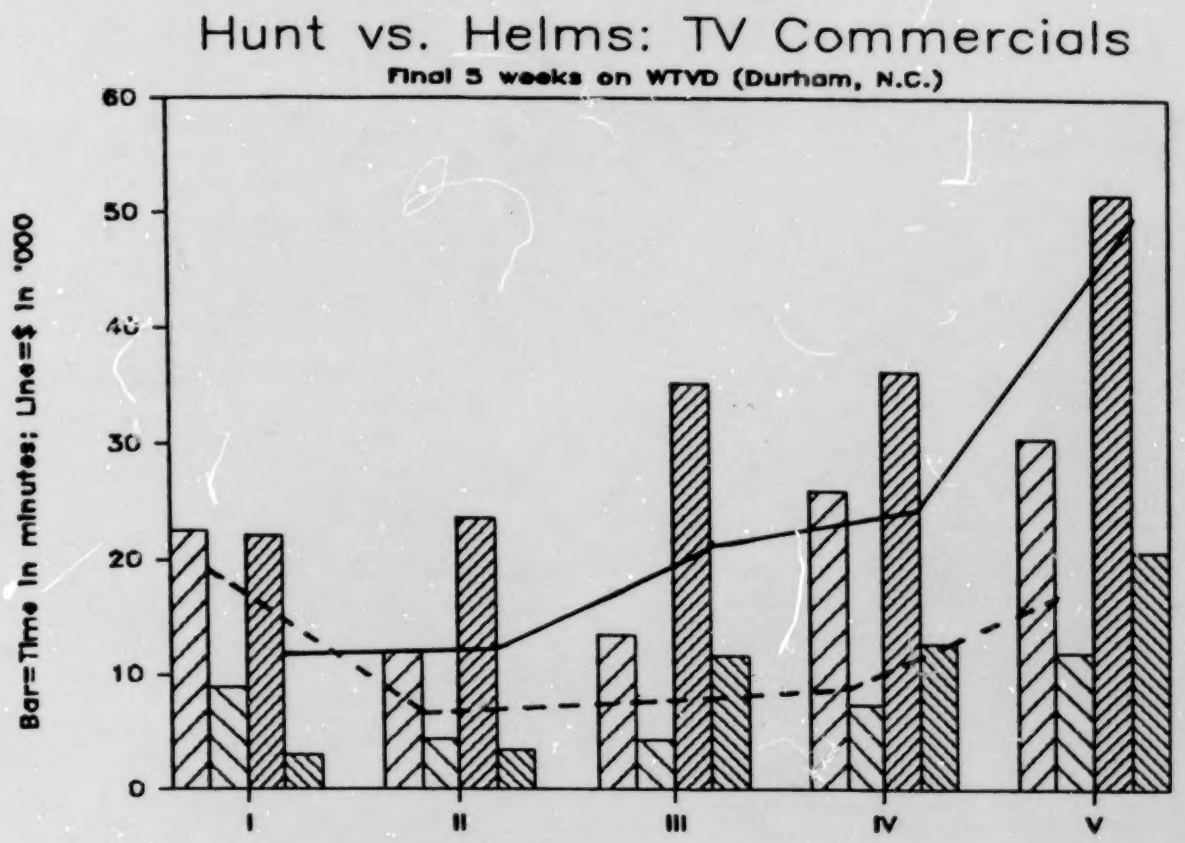
TABLE 3.1: ADVERTISING, VOTER AGENDA COMPATABILITY

AGENDA	TV News(d)	Television Advertising Hunt	Television Advertising Helms	Message voters recd. from advt. Hunt	Message voters recd. from advt. Helms	Reason for Voting Hunt	Reason for Voting Helms
TV News	1.0						
Hunt Advt.	.23	1.0					
Helms Advt.	.12	.07	1.0				
Message from Hunt ad	.29	.51*	.42*	1.0			
Message from Helms ad	.41*	.32	.60*	.64*	1.0		
Reason vote Hunt	.06	.43*	-.23	.34	.28	1.0	
Reason vote Helms	.19	.03	.67*	.53*	.68*	-.17	1.0

* Spearman's rho; p = .05

(a). Advertising agendas for Hunt and Helms prime-time political spots from content analysis.
(b). Public salience of Hunt and Helms advertising messages. Asked of those who had seen Hunt/Helms advertising: "What was the most important message you received from these advertisements for Hunt/Helms on television?"
(c). Voter agenda from statewide survey. Asked of those who had made a decision to vote: "What is the most important reason for voting for Hunt/Helms?"
(d). Television news agenda from content analysis of last five weeks of campaign.

FIGURE 2:



KEY:

(Bars)

Hunt — Total time

Hunt — Prime time

Helms — Total time

Helms — Prime time

(Line)

- - - - - Hunt spending in '000 dollars

——— Helms spending in '000 dollars

Week I = Oct. 2 - Oct. 8
Week II Oct. 9 - Oct. 15
Week III Oct. 16 - Oct. 22
Week IV Oct. 23 - Oct. 29
Week V Oct. 30 - Nov. 5